**Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
Creating Developmentally Appropriate Learning Environments for**

**Young Children, Preschool to Grade 3**

July 2021

# Brief 2: Culturally Responsive Family Engagement

The following early childhood brief was created as companion document for the [Elements of High Quality Kindergarten](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/hq-kindergarten.docx), [Elements of High Quality Elementary Classrooms](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/hq-elementary.docx) and the [joint position statement on play as an instructional strategy](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/play-statement.docx). The brief contains a summary of this topic along with strategies and approaches that reflect high quality early childhood practices. Each brief is followed by a list of related resources and references that were used to develop the brief.

The full set of briefs can be found on the [Department’s Early Learning webpage](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/).

* **Brief 1: Collaboration with Community Based Partners**
* [**Brief 2**](#_Section_2:_Culturally)**: Culturally Responsive Family Engagement**
* [**Brief 3**](#_Section_3:_Supporting)**: Supporting Social-Emotional Learning and Well-Being in Culturally Responsive Ways**
* [**Brief 4**](#_Section_4:_Creating)**: Creating Antiracist Environments for Young Children**
* [**Brief 5: Planning for Developmentally Appropriate Practices**](#_Section_5:_Planning)

While the topics of these briefs are relevant to all grades, Preschool to 12th Grade, they are written with a particular focus on our youngest students, Preschool to 3rd grade.

## **Culturally Responsive Family Engagement**

## Success in promoting positive outcomes for students, particularly students in the younger grades, is premised on a strong foundation of collaboration and engagement, particularly engagement with families. [Strengthening Partnerships: A Framework for Prenatal through Young Adulthood Family Engagement in Massachusetts](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/family-engagement-framework.pdf) (framework) was posted in June 2020 and was created collaboratively with participation from 11 state agencies representing both the Education and the Health and Human Services Secretariat. The cross-sector collaboration on the framework’s development also included input from our state and regional family engagement coalitions, practitioners, families and youth who cross the health, human services and education sectors. Engaging families has always been a critical component of the work of educators and school administrators and is as important now as it ever was.

## The framework reflects a number of needed shifts in family engagement concepts and practices based on research. First, the framework has a very broad and open definition of family engagement and responds to a shift in nomenclature from parent to family – an important acknowledgement of the diverse structures of families and the importance of honoring the many family members who may be involved in a child’s life. Second, the shift from involvement to engagement highlights the recognition that family engagement is not something that we do *to* families but something that we do *with* families – a mutual relationship that we establish with families that exists in an ongoing collaborative way over time, and not as a one-time interaction.

The framework’s guiding principles highlight inclusiveness of all families, including all cultures, families with a range of first languages, families from different income levels, and so on. The principles also speak very strongly to matters of equity – honoring the unique strengths that each family brings to this family-school partnership. The principles also call for honoring the many and varied cultures and linguistic backgrounds and recognizing these as strengths, not challenges. Equity as it is addressed in the framework is about meeting individual families wherever they are in their engagement and providing them what they need to further engage; it is about building trusting, authentic relationships and supporting their engagement in this important partnership to support children’s health, development, learning and overall well-being.

These key points are emphasized through the four elements of the framework:

* Building Trusting Relationships;
* Promoting Family Well-Being;
* Promoting Pathways for Partnerships with Families; and
* Supporting Child and Youth Development, Learning Health and Well-Being.

The first and foundational element of the framework is **Building Trusting Relationships** with families. Without intentional and authentic efforts to build (or re-build) trust with families, our efforts to engage families will be less effective and less impactful. We build trusting relationships by engaging regularly, reflecting on our values and biases in order to better understand differing perspectives, and being willing to accept discomfort as we build relationships with others who differ from us. Strategies include:

* authentically seeking to learn about families, their traditions, their values, and their dreams for their children;
* going into the community to meet families where they live or feel most comfortable (e.g., meetings in homes or neutral community locations);
* providing families meaningful opportunities to have voice in decisions;
* creating opportunities for families to engage with other families; and
* communicating with families in on-going, reciprocal ways and in preferred languages.

The second element of the framework speaks to **Promoting Family Well-Being**. Many families struggle in a multitude of ways and when families struggle to provide for and address their basic needs, they will most certainly struggle to engage with educators and administrators around their child’s health, development, learning and well-being. While some may mistakenly view this as a weak commitment (or lack of) to their child’s learning, it is helpful to understand that this may be a reflection of inequitable access to community resources, stable employment, healthcare, and more. These outcomes result in the need to prioritize the security, stability and well-being of the family unit. School administrators and educators succeed in engaging families when they take care to “meet them where they are”, showing interest in what matters most to the family, and being aware of the family’s perspective and needs. Family engagement that is seen as a family, school and community partnership highlights the need for efforts to build partnerships with community-based organizations (see Brief 1: Collaboration with Community-Based Partners) to ensure that families can support their needs not only in education but in health and human services as well.

Family engagement challenges practitioners to individualize the approach to how we engage with each family, which is the third element of the framework – **Promoting Pathways for Partnerships with Families**. Some families step into leadership and advocacy roles while other families may choose to engage in different ways. Our work with families is to ensure that we understand and respect how families feel most comfortable to engage, create and value those diverse opportunities that are responsive to families’ definition of engagement, and support a family’s capacity to continue their engagement over time.

**Supporting Child and Youth Development, Learning Health and Well-Being** is the fourth element of the framework. The focus of this element is to work together with families to create better and more positive outcomes for all children and youth. Trusting relationships and on-going, reciprocal communication between families and educators are key factors with the power to impact students' development and learning. Trust means families and educators are seen as equal partners in students’ educational journey and work together to best meet their needs.

The final sections of the framework address the intersection of transitions and family engagement as well as the importance of building the skills, competencies and confidence of educators and families to engage in ways that are responsive to the diverse needs of families. The framework can serve as the cornerstone of work that schools engage in with families and community partners to strengthen engagement efforts. As schools and districts work to connect with and support families, district and school administrators and staff may find it helpful to become familiar with the framework as well as the [Family, School and Community Partnerships Fundamentals](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/fscp-fundamentals.docx) (Fundamentals) document. The Fundamentals document is a self-assessment tool that is aligned with the above described [Family Engagement Framework](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/family-engagement-framework.pdf) and provides districts and schools with the opportunity to reflect on the intentionality and authenticity of family engagement efforts and to identify areas that could be strengthened across the elements of the framework.

See the See Appendix A: Resources for examples of effective family engagement practices and references that support understanding diversity in families.

For any questions, more information, or to speak with a member of DESE’s Early Learning team about this document or the work in your community, please email [achievement@doe.mass.edu](mailto:achievement@doe.mass.edu).

## **Appendix A: Resources for Culturally Responsive Family Engagement**

*General Resources*

1. DESE:

* [Family Engagement Initiatives and Resources](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/default.html?section=family)
* [Family Portal](https://www.doe.mass.edu/families/)

1. NAEYC:

* [Becoming Upended: Teaching and Learning about Race and Racism with Young Children and Their Families](https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/may2018/teaching-learning-race-and-racism)
* [Principles of Effective Family Engagement](https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/family-engagement/principles)
* [Family Engagement in Action](https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/family-engagement)

1. [National Public Radio (NPR): Talking Race With Young Children](https://www.npr.org/2019/04/24/716700866/talking-race-with-young-children?fbclid=IwAR262i36JkNreR2lYg0pPPHDPL9u6iyHSVkMV2vrR3Ehdl-1oG-0ZlXKMrY)

*Family Engagement Professional Development*

1. [Family Engagement Lab](https://www.familyengagementlab.org/):

* [Learning Series](https://www.familyengagementlab.org/learning_series.html) Newsletter
* [Family Engagement Blog series](https://www.familyengagementlab.org/blog/category/family-engagement)
  1. DESE in partnership with the [Equity Imperative](https://www.equityimperative.org/): Antiracist Family Engagement - to access this resource, email achievement@doe.mass.edu.

**Appendix B: References for Culturally Responsive Family Engagement**

Rothstein-Fisch, C., & Trumbull, E. (2008). *Managing Diverse Classrooms: How to Build on Students’ Cultural Strengths.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Williams, E. R., & Baber, C. R. (2007). Building trust through culturally reciprocal home-school-community collaboration from the perspective of African-American parents. The Official Journal of the National Association for Multicultural Education, 9(2), 3-9.